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Populist Vanguard: a History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance

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Book Reviews

Populist Vanguard: A History of the Southern Farmers' Alliance, by Robert C. McMath, Jr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.

In the *Populist Vanguard* Robert C. McMath, Jr. traces the gestation, growth and ultimate demise of the largest and most influential farmers' organization of the nineteenth century, the National Farmers' Alliance and Industrial Union, better known as the Southern Farmers' Alliance. This group provided the organizational base for the People's party, itself the most successful third party since the formation of the G.O.P. in the 1850s.

From its obscure and humble beginnings on the central Texas farming frontier in the 1870s, the Southern Alliance quickly moved from being a largely stray-catching, vigilante movement to an organization that emphasized marketing and purchasing cooperatives. "In the cooperative movement," argues McMath, "the Alliance had . . . found an appealing program that would enable it to expand beyond the frontier." (p. 19) Cooperatives indeed promised hope to the mass of cotton belt farmers who frequently lived in a state of economic dependency. Using the cooperative concept and skilled organizing techniques, the Southern Alliance in the late 1880s spread rapidly throughout the South and into other sections of the country, particularly the Great Plains. By the summer of 1890 the Alliance claimed more than 1,200,000 members in twenty-seven states.

But the Southern Alliance proved to be more than a farmers' cooperative movement. At the local level its picnics and other recreational activities meant much to an often socially isolated rural membership. The Alliance also entered politics. One issue that prompted political involvement was the desire by certain Alliance men, especially its leader C. W. Macune, for the subtreasury scheme. Then, in 1891, a complicated series of issues and events pushed the movement toward political insurgency, at a time when the cooperative exchanges were crumbling. But McMath does not contend that the Southern Alliance destroyed itself by moving from economic cooperation to political radicalism. Rather, "[I]n the south, the cooperative experiment had clearly failed [by the early 1890s] and alliance membership had plummeted before the People's party appeared. In the crippling depression of the mid-1890s, the southern exchanges would have gone under, dragging the Alliance down with them, even if there had been no Populist movement." (p. 154)

The *Populist Vanguard* is a valuable book, although portions of the narrative were already adequately covered by the "standard" history of populism, John D. Hick's *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance*

and the People's Party, published in 1931. McMath's book has some limitations—more might have been said about Southern Alliance activities in Iowa and the Dakotas, and the author fails to explain adequately why the Southern Alliance lost out so completely to the Northern Alliance in Nebraska. The early chapters are a chore to read, but fortunately, the study becomes much more lively. The chapter on "Brothers and Sisters: The Alliance as Community" is superb. More importantly, Professor McMath cogently develops his thesis of the Southern Alliance as the Populist vanguard.

—H. Roger Grant
The University of Akron

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Russian-German Settlements in the United States, by Richard Sallet. Translated by La Vern J. Rippley and Armand Bauer. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1976. pp. xii, 297, \$9.50.

In the eighteenth century, Russian empress Catherine the Great, who was of German origin, granted liberal terms for Germans who wished to settle in Russia. Thousands did so, clustering near the Black Sea or the Volga River. For the next century these migrants retained their German language, religion, and culture within Russia. After 1870 when the Russian government threatened to make them subject to military service and in other ways restricted the liberal terms Catherine had granted, some of them migrated to the United States. The migration continued until World War I, by which time the Russian Germans had made a substantial place for themselves in American life as wheat and sugar beet farmers on the Great Plains.

As a young man in the 1920s Richard Sallet came to know these people in his capacity as editor of the *Dakota Freie Presse*, a weekly which circulated among the group. He spent some of his time traveling among different settlements soliciting subscriptions. Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., suggested the suitability of the topic for a thesis and Sallet produced the original manuscript in German for a Ph.D. at Gottingen. In 1931 it was published in the United States in German. Unknown to each other, La Vern Rippley and Armand Bauer began working independently on a translation into English. Later they combined forces to produce this version. Several other persons including Sallet read the translation critically, and at various points translators and readers provide corrective footnotes to some of Sallet's original assertions. Rippley has also written a useful introduction to help the reader follow Sallet's text.

Unfortunately such an introduction is necessary because Sallet's work is disjointed and poorly organized. It is easy to become confused and lose inter-

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